

11 April 1956

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director Central Intelligence

SUBJECT: Collective Leadership in the USSR - Are there Historic Parallels?

1. Our frame of reference is a collective leadership in peace time and without the stress of major crises. The present Soviet collective leadership operates, in fact, under politically and economically favorable circumstances.
2. We believe that there is no historic parallel to the present Soviet experiment. It is entirely possible that the Soviet leaders are about to develop a new form of "dictatorship by committee", giving them the advantage of appearing to be quasi-democratic.
3. In the past, there have been instances of dictatorship by committee, but only in actual periods of revolution and crisis. Outstanding examples of such terroristic committees are Cromwell's "Protectorate"; Robespierre's Committee for Public Safety and the Leninist period of "War Communism". Perhaps the committee of three, set up by Chiang Kai-shek upon the death of Sun Yat Sen, lasting from 1925 to 1928, might be mentioned here; during that period the Chinese revolution was consolidated, and the struggle for power was initiated. In each of the above instances, the governing committees were formed as the result of emergency. Councils in ancient Greece and Rome are not pertinent examples since political, social and economic conditions differed vastly from our own. Nor can governments in medieval city republics - such as Venice - be compared with what we call collective leadership, since the leader, the Doge, was an authoritarian executive elected by a collegium of hereditary aristocracy.
4. There is no such emergency in the USSR today. But under the terroristic dictatorship of Stalin the Soviet leaders have learned their lesson. Almost certainly none of them is inclined to suffer another Stalin-like era again. This is presumably the case, particularly among the old Bolsheviks who had the most intimate access to Stalin. The younger leaders who have not been quite as much exposed to the old dictator's whims may have a less deeply ingrained reaction.
5. When we speak of collective leadership, we mean a committee of a very few men, probably not more than five or six. The larger the membership, the greater the likelihood that fractionalization may occur, dividing the committee into antagonistic groups. Such developments are, of course, possible also among a few men, but in the case of the Soviet leaders, the psychological impact of the Stalin terror probably acts as a preventive. The question is, then, what will happen after the old Bolsheviks have retired or died? It is doubtful that the younger generation, now in their fifties, will continue to accept a collective leadership without a struggle for personal power.

6. It is believed that the present collective leadership will last for a period which may correspond to the tenure of the old Bolsheviks now in the Presidium. This may continue for at least four or five years, barring major upheavals in the international field. There is an outside chance that this form of committee government in peacetime may contribute to more "democratic" forms of rule. There is also a slight chance that the period of collective leadership may be prolonged into an era of a new Communist oligarchy, led by a primus inter pares. It is more probable, however, that, as the old Bolsheviks fade out and the younger men replace them, a struggle for power will again begin, ending in dictatorship, in the traditional Russian fashion.

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Chief, SRS/DDI